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MIDDLE SCHOOL VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE: CURRENT PRACTICES IN MASSACHUSETTS

Massachusetts State Council on Vocational Education

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PREFACE

In May 1989, the State Council on Vocational Education convened two meetings of guidance personnel from regional vocational-technical schools, middle schools, and junior high schools across the state. These individuals were assembled to discuss the middle school guidance process and enrollment patterns in vocational-technical schools. The impetus for these focus groups was the Council's finding that disproportionately high levels of students deficient in academic skills and students possessing special education needs are enrolled in vocational-technical schools statewide. Three subjects were discussed at the meetings hosted by the Council: a) causes of the disproportionate enrollment patterns; b) methods for exposing a broader range of students to the vocational-technical education option and for improving the relationship between vocational-technical high schools and junior high/middle schools; and c) promising practices in vocational guidance occurring at the pre-high school level which adequately inform and counsel students about the vocational-technical option.

At each meeting, guidance directors from approximately a half dozen vocational-technical high schools met with counselors from middle and junior high schools within their catchment areas as well as staff, consultants, and members of the State Council on Vocational Education. The first session brought together high school guidance directors with their counterparts from "sending" schools which the directors described as "close" or "collaborative" in their relationship to vocational-technical schools. The second session paired the same guidance directors with counselors from schools they described as more "distant" in their relationship to vocational-technical schools. Thus, a large proportion of the relevant schools and a variety of perspectives were represented.

These meetings provided a wealth of information about the guidance process and the factors which contribute to a student's decision to enroll in comprehensive or vocational-technical education. This information forms the core of two documents. The first report, Access to Vocational-Technical Education in Massachusetts, documented an overrepresentation of special education and academically deficient students in the vocational-technical schools and, with the help of the participating pupil personnel, identified causes and proposed policy resolutions to address these problems. In fulfillment of the State Council's federal mandate to evaluate the vocational education system biennially, the report was shared with the Governor, the Massachusetts Board of Education and the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor.

The second document, Middle School Vocational Guidance: Current Practices in Massachusetts, now before you, is an outline of promising activities currently practiced in some of the Commonwealth's schools. These methods reportedly have been successful at exposing students to all their available high school options and have enhanced the relationships between vocational-technical high schools and junior high/middle schools.

The State Council on Vocational Education wishes to thank the counselors and guidance directors from the middle schools, junior high schools, and vocational-technical schools who participated in the focus group discussions with the Council and its staff. Each practice listed in this document directly reflects methods identified by these individuals. This report is truly theirs.

The Council also wishes to acknowledge the efforts of Abigail T. Slayton and Thomas Shaughnessy for their work to coordinate this research effort and to prepare this document as well as William J. Spring, past Chair of the Council's Evaluation Committee, for his facilitation of the focus group meetings.

Our vocational-technical system at the secondary level in Massachusetts is virtually unique in the nation and is often envied by educators in other states. Through vocational-technical high schools located in most of our urban centers and dotted across regions of the state, the Commonwealth makes four years of vocational-technical education available to her school-aged youth. Students of varied aspirations and abilities are provided a wide array of program options through this system of comprehensive vocational-technical schools, ranging from preparation to pursue higher education in highly technical fields to preparation for immediate full-time employment in a skilled profession or trade.

Counseling professionals from these vocational-technical schools and from middle and junior high schools across the state identified four areas of school improvements that have better enabled students to take advantage of vocational-technical education. They are: a) exposure to career and vocational-technical education at the elementary and middle grades, b) promotion and support of secondary school vocational-technical education, c) partnerships and enhanced communication between vocational-technical schools and middle/junior high schools as well as between schools and the private sector, and d) individualized counseling and student-centered services.

This document briefly discusses each area of improvement and outlines examples of school practices that have been successful at achieving these aims. These practices represent some of the more promising methods currently in use to inform and guide young people as they make decisions about their high school curriculum options.

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I. EXPOSURE TO CAREER AND VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Some schools begin exposing students to the world of work and the variety of career options in the early elementary grades. Such exposure prepares students both for secondary school curricular choices and for career choices following high school graduation.

A. Elementary School Practices

1. Career education integrated into the curriculum.
2. Field trips and visiting speakers related to career and vocational education, coupled with assignments to write about such experiences.
3. Summer camps for students provided by vocational-technical schools.

In the middle grades, some schools provide students with programs to explore occupational fields and secondary school alternatives. Guidance counselors play a crucial role in these programs to aid a student's decision-making.

B. Junior High/Middle School Practices

1. Exposure to industrial arts and technical curricula.
2. Inventory of students' interests (academic, personal, extracurricular, occupational, etc.) to explore occupational interests and suitability.
3. Early and continuous exposure to the vocational-technical education option.
4. Full day tours of vocational-technical schools by all students, starting in 7th grade.
5. Open houses at vocational-technical schools for parents and students.

6. Presentations from vocational-technical school personnel to students at junior high/middle schools.

7. Shadow programs in which students pick one shop (usually after having a full day tour of a whole school) in which to spend several days obtaining first hand experience of vocational-technical education.

8. Career days at junior high/middle schools with speakers from different occupations. (Students choose which speaker session(s) to attend based on their individual interests.)

9. Pre-vocational assessments for all students, especially special education students, to determine appropriateness of vocational-technical placement.

II. PROMOTION AND SUPPORT OF VOCATIONAL-TECHNICAL EDUCATION

Many students, parents, school personnel, and communities are either unaware of, or hold negative misperceptions about, vocational-technical education as a high school option for students of all abilities and interests. A number of junior high schools, middle schools, and vocational-technical schools are working in concert to better inform students about their high school choices and provide an accurate picture of the contemporary vocational-technical school.

A. Outreach Practices

1. Aggressive outreach campaigns to publicize the value of vocational-technical education to students of all abilities, parents, school personnel, and communities:

   a. videotape presentations
   b. school personnel visits
   c. direct mail (brochures, pamphlets, newsletters)
   d. public events

B. Public Awareness Practices

1. Workshops to introduce vocational-technical education to parents and students.

2. Parent education about the benefits of vocational-technical education and full involvement in the student guidance process.

3. Presentation of vocational-technical education as something to strive for - an enrichment experience that must be earned.

4. "Outward Bound-like" summer programs at vocational-technical schools, emphasizing teamwork and relationship building for junior high/middle school students.

5. Renaming of vocational schools to "technical" schools.

6. Information efforts about the successes of vocational-technical graduates, especially relative to general education graduates.

7. Publicity about the range of options available for vocational-technical school graduates (i.e. four-year college, community college, military academy, immediate professional employment).

8. Publicity about vocational-technical school offerings and requirements (e.g. admission and curriculum standards, athletics and extracurricular activities, and 9th grade exploratory programs in which students choose a variety of shops to experience before deciding on a specialization).

C. School Personnel Development Practices

1. In-service training for guidance counselors on community liaison skills.

2. Regular regional meetings of school guidance directors to share ideas and experiences.

3. Information activities about the value of vocational-technical education to middle school counselors and teachers.

III. PARTNERSHIPS AND ENHANCED COMMUNICATION

For educational services to provide the seamless continuum of learning that students need, close relationships across levels of the system are crucial. For education to be relevant

in this time of rapid economic and technological change, relationships with the employing environment also are important. There are a variety of cooperative interconnections within the education community and between education and the larger community in practice across the state.

A. Relationships Between Schools

1. middle and junior high schools with vocational-technical high schools.

2. comprehensive high schools with vocational-technical high schools.

3. special education collaboratives with vocational-technical high schools.

B. Relationships Between Schools and Business/Industry:

1. co-op programs
2. curriculum development
3. teacher development programs
4. scholarships
5. speakers bureaus

IV. INDIVIDUALIZED COUNSELING AND STUDENT-CENTERED SERVICE

Counselors are the gatekeepers to a student's future. Some schools have made the guidance system more effective in a variety of ways.

A. Reduced student/counselor ratios.

B. Commitment to bilingual/bicultural outreach.

C. Support for vocational-technical education as the choice of preference for average ability students.

The strategies outlined in this report are a sampling of the creative ideas being developed in the Commonwealth's schools to provide better guidance and educational services to our students. It is the hope of the service providers who participated in this effort and the hope of the State Council on Vocational Education that, by sharing this information, practices such as these will be more widely adopted and expanded upon throughout the state and the relationships between vocational-technical programs and middle/junior high schools will become closer and more cooperative. Our youth deserve it.